

CONSTITUENCY NOTES

Julie Morgan MP

A Vote of Confidence in Young People

In November, I was lucky enough to be drawn 11th in the Private Members' Bill ballot, the annual opportunity that MPs get to champion a specific piece of legislation.

20 MPs are listed as “winners” in the ballot, but only the first 7 have any realistic chance of having their Bill fully debated, voted upon and then, perhaps, made law.

Being drawn 11th, however, does mean, that I get to choose a Bill and present it and perhaps, if time allows, have it debated in the House of Commons chamber. It provides a chance to highlight a particular issue.

After much deliberation, I decided to sponsor a Bill that calls for the voting age to be lowered from 18 to 16. This Bill is supported by a cross-party group of MPs, as well as by the Electoral Reform Society and the Votes at 16 Coalition.

It is an issue that everyone seems to have an opinion about one way or the other and I hope that it will spark lots of lively discussions about whether 16 year-olds should be able to vote in all public elections across the UK. .

I was delighted to be able to present this Bill in the House of Commons chamber last week. I hope that it will inspire debate and ultimately, that it will influence the Government – my Bill may not be passed into law, but it will provide the opportunity to campaign for a change in the law.

I have already met with members of the British Youth Council and I was very impressed by how articulate they were about this issue. They argued that 16 year olds can work full-time and have to pay taxes at 16 and so should be able to have some say in where their taxes go. The point is that there should be no taxation without representation. When we ask so much of young people, it seems unfair that they are not allowed to have a say about the direction the country should take.

They can also do a lot of other things at 16 – join the military and marry, for example – and to deny them the vote seems very inconsistent. As one young person said to me “Either leave us out or take us in” – at the moment, we seem to be giving mixed messages. I think we should invite young people in.

Giving the vote to 16 year olds could also motivate them to participate in the democratic process throughout their lives, providing the shot in the arm our democracy needs, given the current low voter turnout. And people who vote when young usually continue the habit for the rest of their lives.

At 16, many young people are still in full-time education and would therefore have the opportunity to discuss the issues with their peers and their teachers and become politically engaged. It would certainly make citizenship classes very relevant.

I think giving 16 year olds the vote would be a vote of confidence in young people – there are so many unfair negative stereotypes of the young and I think that young people would respond very well to this responsibility.

I'm sure that they would live up to our expectations.

If you have any views on this issue, I would be very happy to hear from you – you can write to me at morganj@parliament.uk or at the House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA or ring (029) 20 624 166.